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Language, experience and translation
Towards a comparative dimension

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In Memoriam Reinhart Koselleck (1923-2006)
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Courtesey of the help provided by these public and private institutions, I have been able to organize and participate in a series of academic events, seminars and conferences where gradually, through various conversations with a number of European and American colleagues, most of them members of the History of Political and Social Concepts Group (HPSCG), the idea of this book began to take shape. A book in which,


Introduction: from ‘facts’ to ‘experiences of the past’

The rise of culture as a paradigm of historical research in recent years reflects a growing distance towards the belief in objective social facts and structures which dominated much of the historical research and the debates on methodology since the late 1960s. Distancing from the normative contents and de-constructing the myths of socio-economic modernization theories have since gone hand in hand with new approaches to the study of past realities: These seem no longer to be primarily determined by class and socio-economic structures, but also by past actors’ linguistic constructions. The discovery of language, performance and space, inter alia, as determining factors of past realities has called the long-held belief in the apparent objective meaning of social formations for historical processes into question. The multiplicity of thematic turns in recent years, from the linguistic to the performative and spatial turn, has thus contributed to a major change in historiographic and methodological debates (Daniel, 2001a and b).

In this context, experience and history of experience have developed as new categories of historical understanding and explanation (Kambartel, 1968; Lüdtke, 1989; Freudiger et al., 1996; Daniel, 2004). They evade a simplistic and mono-causal analytical framework and take into consideration
the importance of language as a prime factor in the structuring, articulation and communication of the individual’s perception of his political, socio-economic and cultural environment. Against this background, this paper will first try to develop and formulate elements that may contribute to a future theory of historical experiences, and, secondly, it will apply the analytical frame of experience to the complex relation between language and experience. Thirdly, it will focus on the question of how to analyze the relation between language and experience on the basis of comparison, transfer, and entangled history. Here the focus will be on the meaning of translations for semantic change, and the concrete example will be the early semantics of ‘liberal/liberalism’ in early nineteenth century Europe. The overall aim is not a systematic analysis, but rather a sketch of symptomatic observations in an attempt to gather theoretical and epistemological elements that may help us understand the nature of historical experience as a paradigm for the study of the relation between language and history.

Towards a theory of experience: heuristic, methodological and epistemological dimensions

From its beginning, the systematic study of history as it developed in the nineteenth century was related to the paradigm of experience (Jaeger, 2002). A ‘true’ reconstruction of the past seemed possible only by an empirical reference to past experiences, as based on a critical reading of historical sources. The result was a growing distance between speculative epistemology and philosophy of history on the one hand and the systematic research of empirical evidence of the past on the others. Referring to a sense for reality (‘Sinn für die Wirklichkeit’), already at the beginning of the nineteenth century, Wilhelm von Humboldt had marked an empirical-scientific claim towards history. Leopold von Ranke equally pointed to the analytical value of history, to its function of offering orientation, as evident in the difference between empirical experience and speculative philosophy. The differentiation between ‘Erfahrung’ and ‘Erkenntnis’ became a characteristic element in the development of
modern historiography in the nineteenth century. Ranke insisted on the premise that it was impossible for the historian to deduce the plurality of events just from speculative concepts because the reality of facts transcended any theoretical categories (Ranke, 1975 [1831-1832]).

Since the nineteenth century, a dynamic development of historical knowledge of past experiences can be observed. Three heuristic dimensions of experience have become ever more important: experiences can be differentiated with regard to diachronic change in different historical epochs, to synchronic differences regarding different cultures, societies, civilizations and forms of life, and to the plurality of particular spaces of experiences, such as politics, economics, society, religion, etc. The progress of historical knowledge has thus led to a process of continuous expansion of historical experiences as based on empirical knowledge. It was on this basis that historical research could assume a central position in the modern humanities, offering historical orientation to societies (Husserl, 1936).

As a key concept of historical research, experiences are characterized by three methodological and epistemological aspects (Jaeger, 2002):

1. In methodological terms, the development of historical research methods in the nineteenth century served as a means to analyze the empirical structure of historical experiences. Historical research, in that respect, is to be understood as the sum of analytical operations which reconstruct the empirical structure behind individual expressions of the past. It was in that sense that Johann Gustav Droysen argued that the basic characteristic of the historical method lay in the premise of understanding past realities by means of systematic research, thus making it distinct from speculative or introspective views of the historical past.

2. In its epistemological aspect, the analytical concept of experience reflects the conflict between objectivist and constructivist positions: experience relates both to the subjective interpretation of events or facts, which according to Max Weber developed their cultural mean-
ing only in the process of interpretation, and it relates to the predisposed and already existing facts and structures behind experiences. John Dewey, the American pragmatist philosopher, underlined this dual nature of experience, its quasi middle position between subject and object. In other words: not only the content of experiences matters, but also the way in which experiences are made. External events derive their historical meaning only from acts of subjective interpretation. Empirical fact, objectivity on the one hand, and subjective perception and interpretative integration on the other, do not exclude each other but form different poles of a complex interrelation. Experiences are not mere constructions. Instead they refer to an empirical reality of past events and actions. The past’s relevance only becomes visible and communicable by the very act of historical interpretation, by generating meaningful experiences which allow for communication. The analytical concept of experience thus allows an understanding of subjectivity and objectivity not as separated entities but rather as two interrelated dimensions of the same phenomenon.

3. Finally, experience as an analytical key concept puts a special focus upon the subjective perception of realities as means of historical orientation and recognition. Cultural historians, in contrast to social historians, focus on this dimension when writing a history of experiences. It concentrates on the willfulness of individual actors, as it is represented in memories or in the mentalities of individuals or groups. Oral history, or the historical interpretation of dreams, may be good examples to illustrate this aspect.

Experience and language: uniqueness and reiteration

Experiences refer both to a stream of past events and to the various levels of subjective perceptions and interpretations of these events. In contrast to mere observations, experiences are characterized by the application of interpretative knowledge, i.e. a reservoir of linguistic and performative codes, including leitmotifs, topoi, metaphors, dichotomies and arguments. They allow an individual or a group to structure the constant
influx of information generated by events and actions. Structuring information is a basic precondition for generating, formulating and communicating meaning. Hence, experiences oscillate between each individual’s perspective and collective narratives, making possible individual and inter-subjective communication. Experiences, as expressed in concepts, arguments or metaphors, allow meaningful orientation. In that way, experience as a basic paradigm in historical analysis transcends not only the traditional schism between ‘real’ history, as visible in so-called hard facts and structures, and the way in which past contemporaries dealt with their environment, but also bridges the apparent gap between language and action. The basic question behind many cultural approaches to history is not only concerned with the interrelation between language with experiences, but more precisely with the different forms of past experiences and the different ways in which they are recorded and communicated (Leonhard, 2006).

Reinhart Koselleck developed three different categories of human experience: first, primordial experiences of individuals which are eo ipso unique and which cannot be repeated, secondly, reiterated experiences which can be communicated between subjects, and thirdly, experiences which are generated ex post facto, i.e. through historical reflection. All three categories can be related to different categories of narrations and historiographies, also reflecting the transformation from individual ‘histories’ to the collective singular of ‘history’: first, ‘Aufschreiben’, that is an individual’s writing down of unique and personal events in order to explain them; secondly, ‘Fortschreiben’, focusing on the interconnection between individual histories, and thirdly ‘Umschreiben’, that is, a revision in the forms and ways of communicating experiences as they are derived from past sources, referring to an ex-post-facto perspective, to a teleological causality by re-writing from the apparent end of historical processes and arguing from the knowledge of historical consequences (Koselleck, 1988: 13-61; Steinmetz, 2006: 427-431).

Koselleck himself was well aware of the difference between individual and primary experiences and the inter-subjective communication of ex-
periences. As a historian, he was interested in the complex processes of how individually unique experiences could be transformed into ‘common histories’ by accumulation and sedimentation, by the incorporation of external experiences into the structure of individual, internal experiences and vice versa. Yet, as a contemporary witness of the age of extremes and as a result of his own traumatizing experiences during the Second World War, and more so towards the end of his life, he insisted on the unique and non-interchangeable character of individual experiences. Only from an external perspective could they be compared with other individuals’ experiences (Koselleck, 1995).¹

Any meaningful and innovative study of historical semantics has to take into consideration these dimensions of experience. Hence, new research on the relation between experience and language needs to go beyond a classical history of concepts on three levels (Schultz, 1999; Bödeker, 2007): First, it needs to concentrate not just on isolated concepts, but on semantic fields and clusters, arguments oscillating between various concepts, topoi, metaphors, basic dichotomies such as ‘above/below’, ‘external/internal’, ‘earlier/later’ which, according to Koselleck, serve as repetitive tools to structure complexity (Koselleck, 2005: 6; Koselleck, 2006; Steinmetz, 2006: 431-432; see also Fernández Sebastián and Fuentes, 2006: 100-104). The main focus of this analysis lies on the meaning and function of these heuristic tools. Secondly, the analysis of semantics needs to take the dimensions of comparison, transfer and entanglement into consideration. Here translations can be seen as a paradigm: When and why do concepts, arguments, etc., ‘travel’ between societies? When and why do they become translatable, and where are the limits of these translation processes?

Thirdly, we need to ask about the methodological and analytical consequences of the tension between the uniqueness of historical experiences which cannot be exchanged, exported, or translated, and the repetition, reiteration, and application of past experiences through historical analogies. If taken seriously, Koselleck’s observation of unique experiences would make it almost impossible to apply the study of experiences to
whole societies. It seems more appropriate to speak of a tension between uniqueness and the possible repetition of experiences as formulated and communicated in concepts or arguments: as Koselleck himself argued, a minimum of reiteration and analogy is always needed in order to apply old concepts to new experiences, underlining the importance of longue durée perspectives (Fernández Sebastián and Fuentes, 2006: 103). The uniqueness of individual experiences can also be applied to collectives on the level of synchronic comparisons: there were no universal semantics of a concept such as ‘liberalism’ in early nineteenth century Europe, but rather a spectrum of unique semantics of concepts being used in arguments in Britain, France, Germany, Spain, or Italy. We are hence confronted with a dual paradigm of diachronic synchronicity and a pluralism of saddle epochs (Fernández Sebastián and Fuentes, 2006: 99-104). However, repetitive structures also exist, not in the sense of identities, but as analogies which are needed in order to integrate radically new experiences or even traumatizing ruptures.

Diachronic and synchronic plurality: sedimentation of experiences, comparative semantics and translation

The following analysis tries to apply the paradigm of a history of experience to the historical semantics of the ideological concept of liberal/liberalism, understood here as an expression of condensed political and social experiences since the end of the eighteenth century. It is important, in this respect, to focus on both diachronic change and synchronic diversity. How are we to understand different experiences behind seemingly ‘equivalent’ words which contain different semantic structures? How does the translation of experiences actually function?

Ideologies, Clifford Geertz once remarked, are cognitive maps ‘of problematic social reality’ (1973: 220). The semantic variations of political and social key concepts in particular contexts represent, like a map, different historical landscapes, based on specific experiences of the past and expectations of the future. Maps imply travel, and travelling in the
landscape of ideologies implies contact between speakers, the transfer of interpretative knowledge and hence the semantic transformation of concepts as they are used in arguments. All these elements underline the importance of translational processes for any understanding of semantic change. Every translation involves a conceptual movement between the translatable and the translated, and indeed translation can be described not only as a metaphor, but as a method of semantic analysis. From this perspective, translations have both a diachronic and a synchronic dimension: they stand behind conceptual changes over time, from past past to past present, but they also represent the synchronic export and import of concepts and of their semantic structure between languages and vocabularies, thus reflecting the transfer of hermeneutic knowledge needed to articulate them in discourse (Leonhard, 2008).

A comparative history of concepts brings together both dimensions of translation by stressing the diachronic change over time and the synchronic variations of semantic structures. The former points to translations in one national language community, the other to contact and translation within and between different national languages. If taken together, the comparison not only focuses on isolated conceptual histories, but also on processes of semantic transfer and interaction as well as conceptual overlapping.

Two hermeneutical problems are involved here, which the semantics of liberal/liberalism can help to illustrate. First, many comparative studies still tend to equate the meaning of the ideological semantics of liberalism in different countries, as if it meant basically a similar canon of ideas, or movements, or parties. They do not take into consideration the distinct contemporary meanings of liberal in different historical contexts. The neglect of this semantic aspect leads to the trap of semantic nominalism, i.e. the unconsidered transfer of a concept’s semantics from the contemporary political language of one country to the political discourse of another (Leonhard, 2006b). This implicit equation of contemporary meanings in different contexts conceals an important focus of experiences and expectations, in other words the possibility of replacing the
category of universal European liberalism with a spectrum of distinct histories of contemporary meanings of liberal. This is in contrast to a traditional history of ideas approach which would point to the singular of European liberalism, quasi ‘distilled’ from the realm of ideas to which liberalism could be applied avant la lettre, i.e. before the concept actually existed in contemporary political discourse (Leonhard, 2001: 47, 66 and 83; and Leonhard, 2004). Yet the semantics of political concepts are not the same in different countries. Different contexts point to the problem of how distinct experiences of the past and past expectations of the future were translated into distinct political and social discourses, and how that process was stimulated by the import, export, and translation of foreign concepts and their semantic fields. In other words, it is not possible to sum up the meaning of French libéralisme, German Liberalismus, Italian liberalismo and English liberalism in a universal concept of European Liberalism. Behind linguistically ‘equal’ or ‘similar’ words lie essentially different experiences, interests and expectations.

Second, there is what may be called a translational circle. The results of a comparative semantic analysis need to be re-translated into a language. Theoretically, a researcher in such a situation would need a meta-language in order to avoid this problem of Rückübersetzung, such as a meta-theory, which in other comparative analyses serves as a tertium comparationis, for example modernization theories in social history. However, for comparative semantics, there is no such meta-language. Since there is no easy solution to this problem, the historian needs at least to be aware of it (Koselleck, Spree and Steinmetz, 1991: 22; Fernández Sebastián and Fuentes, 2006: 111-112; Cassin, 2004).

Against this background, this paper seeks to illustrate the importance of translational processes for comparative semantic analyses in two parts: first, two ideal-type models are presented, which have been developed on the basis of the semantics of liberal/liberalism in European comparison, one focusing on the semantic transformation of concepts, the other concentrating on translation as a selective export and import of interpretative knowledge. Secondly, some exemplary elements of the
translational processes that influenced the emergence of liberal as a political key concept in early nineteenth Europe are analyzed in order to illustrate the importance of translations for semantic change.

a) Differentiating the Sattelzeit: Models of semantic transformation and translation

On the basis of such a comparative analysis of semantics, it is also possible to differentiate Reinhard Koselleck's concept of the saddle epoch (Sattelzeit) (Koselleck, 1967; Koselleck, 1972; see in general Steinmetz, 2008). According to this model, a universal semantic change, based on processes such as the democratization of concepts, took place between 1750 and 1850 and resulted in modern concepts in political and social vocabulary. However, in this paper it is argued that only comparison allows for the identification of the specific rhythms of conceptual change and thus of the life-cycle of concepts in different countries. There was no single period in which the European vocabularies became modern, but rather particular paths with different connections, relations and overlapping between the semantics of key political concepts. Both models presented here try to take these premises into consideration. The first describes the diachronic transformation of a concept's semantics, consisting of four stages. Its function is to identify the moment when translations can actually influence conceptual change and semantic transformation.

1. The pre-political stage of semantics: In the case of liberal, this is the stadium dominated by the pre-1789 uses of liberal or liberality in the different contexts. As in the case of Immanuel Kant's 'Liberalität der Denkungsart' (1913: 268) or Sieyès' 'education libérale' (1888 [1789]: 42) of the Third Estate in France, the concepts reflected an enlightened educational ideal without a fixed political or social meaning.

2. A fermentation of traditional and new semantic elements, caused by new political, social and cultural experiences, newly articulated interests and new expectations: pre-political and politicized mean-
ings were now beginning to overlap. This process started with the invention of the *idées liberals* in France in 1799 and their subsequent translation into *liberale Ideen* in Germany and *idee liberali* in Italy (1821 [1816]), but also with the emergence of *liberales* and *serviles* as party names in Spain and the export of this nomenclature to other European countries.

3. The politicization of concepts as controversial through changing connotations of traditional concepts and the development of new concepts: in this phase the speakers attempted to structure the semantic field by canonic definitions and semantic clarity, relying on a number of key experiences and expectations. This is the stadium in which the import of concepts such as the French *idées liberals* created a framework for the articulation of new experiences and stimulated conceptual debates, thereby testing the semantic field.

4. The ideological polarization and development of bipolar or multipolar semantic structures: the focus was now on an antagonistic structure of semantics, resulting in a wider field of political and social nomenclatures and their use in arguments. In the case of liberal, the semantic field became defined by symmetric counter-concepts such as *radical*, *conservative*, or later *socialist*.

Translational processes between national languages played a fundamental role in the second and third stages, when the semantic structure of a concept was still relatively fluid and open. In this phase, the transfer of concepts and their translation served as a stimulating catalyst for politicized discourses. A very good illustration of this constellation is Rolf Reichardt’s reconstruction of a virtual library of French-German translations between 1770 and 1815, a quantitative analysis which documents the importance of French translations in the politicization of German concepts and discourses. It also underlines the growing importance of journal and newspaper articles in this context, especially during the 1790s (Reichardt, 1998: 292).

Conceptual translations presuppose a cultural transfer of concepts that have gained at least a certain degree of universal meaning, before
they can be integrated into national discourses. That was the case with the French political connotation of *libéral* and the Bonapartist *idées libérales* after 1799 in particular. The import of *libéral* and its translation became a dominating feature in early nineteenth century German and Italian political discourses. A quantitative analysis underlines the pioneering role of France as a laboratory of political and social language in early nineteenth century (Leonhard, 2001: 573).

Following from this merely quantitative analysis, the second model tries to identify different stages in the translation between national languages and vocabularies, thereby differentiating various functions of the translational process:

1. Imitating translation of characteristic French expressions or texts taken from newspaper articles, essays, or entries from contemporary dictionaries: this translation usually reflected the direct impact of foreign impressions on a speaker, for instance a German writer travelling to revolutionary Paris and reading political journals there. In this early stadium, there was a characteristic lack of differentiating commentaries which could relate foreign concepts and their semantics directly to the speaker's own political or social context. German Jacobins travelling to Paris translated *principes libéraux* as *liberale Prinzipien*, but focused on the contemporary French context, not on the possibility of applying the concept to the German political situation.³

2. Adapting translation: On the basis of imported foreign concepts, selected semantic elements were applied to a different social and political context. In this phase, the selection of semantics was directed by the specific experiences, interests and expectations of the perceiving speakers. Although it still reflected the foreign origins, the concept's original connotation changed. The French *idées libérales* were not only imitated by *liberale Ideen* or *idee liberali* but the translation was applied to the political experiences and constitutional as well as national expectations in Germany and Italy.
3. Discursive integration: In this phase, concepts and their semantic structures which were now applied to the different political and social contexts of the importing society, were integrated into a society’s discourse. This is documented by the emergence of encyclopedic entries of \textit{liberale Ideen}, for instance in the Brockhaus edition of 1817, without any reference to its French origin but with particular references to the German political and constitutional context (Brockhaus, 1817: 674-675).

Many objections to such evolutionary types and organic patterns may be directed against both models. But their primary function is to have a heuristic instrument in the analysis of particular concepts. What is intended here as well is a stimulus for a broader debate about ways to differentiate Koselleck’s paradigm of a \textit{Sattelzeit} between 1750 and 1850. From that perspective, we may also ask whether parts of these models can be applied to other processes of conceptual change. The aim should be to overcome isolated national histories of concepts by a focus on cultural transfer and semantic interaction between political languages, an entangled history which reflects the synchronic variations of the past (Steinmetz, 2008: 175-177).

\textit{b) Universalization and national application: Translating liberal in early nineteenth-century Europe}

The importance of translational processes for conceptual change can again be illustrated by the comparative semantics of \textit{liberal} in the early nineteenth century. On the European continent, Napoleon’s expansionism led to a direct confrontation with the French idées libérales as Napoleon’s programmatic formula of the results of 1789. In his Proclamation of the 18th Brumaire 1799, justifying the coup d’état, Bonaparte’s idées libérales originally stood for a defensive strategy to safeguard the revolution’s legacy by ending both political instability and social anarchy: ‘Les idées conservatrices, tutélaires, libérales, sont rentrées dans leurs droits par la dispersion des factieux qui opprimaient les conseils, et qui, pour être
Napoleon's invention of the *idées libérales* became part of his short-lived but influential imperial ideology. As the ‘héros des idées libérales’ he proclaimed to be both the only legitimate heir of 1789 and the only *garant* of the revolution’s positive achievements, as incarnated by the *Code Civil* and the idea of the nation’s sovereignty (Bourrienne, 1829, 3: 28). By referring to the imperial understanding of the *idées libérales*, Napoleon thus claimed to fulfill the revolution’s original and legitimate objects. On the other hand, the possibility of turning the transpersonal principle of the *idées libérales* against Napoleon’s military despotism after 1810 integrated the opposition of the *libéraux* around Benjamin Constant and Madame de Staël (Martin, 1987). This explains why the *idées libérales* could survive the Emperor’s defeat in 1815. By discursive export and penetration, by 1815 the *idées libérales* had become a universal concept for continental authors. In Germany and Italy it was possible to distance them from their Napoleonic origin and use them to articulate new constitutional, social and national expectations.

Whereas the English denomination of parties originating in the seventeenth century immunized English political discourse against continental imports, which meant that *liberal* was only slowly and reluctantly integrated into an already existing political nomenclature, in Germany the semantic import of *liberal* coined by the French Revolution and Napoleon was essential. In the member states of the Confederation of the Rhine a new language policy by the French authorities instituted, ensured that the *idées libérales* and the *constitution libérale* found their way to German journals and newspapers. The *idées libérales*, first formulated by Bonaparte in his Proclamation of the 18th Brumaire 1799, and after 1815 translated into *liberale Ideen* now indicated the overall demand for both national unity and constitutional progress in Germany. German authors still look for account of French debates, but their translation changed from a mere imitation of the concept to its application to the particular German situation. An excellent example in this context is Johann Christoph von Aretin’s adapting translation of
a contemporary French article on *Les idées libérales* published in 1814 (Les Idées, 1815). In his translation, Aretin applied the French concept to his own German background and the political and national situation of the German states at the end of the Napoleonic Wars (Aretin, 1816). He gave particular attention to the constitution as the incarnation of a new balance between monarchy and people. But where the French text spoke of *civilisation* as the main criterion behind liberty, Aretin used the German *Bildung* which had a much more socially exclusive meaning. Also, the concept of *nation* had very different connotations in France and Germany at that time. Whereas French semantics oscillated between the nation's revolutionary sovereignty and the nation as represented by the constitutional monarch, the German expectation was to establish a constitutional nation-state which by 1815 already existed in France:


> Une constitution libérale non-seulement donne à une nation tous les genres de liberté que son état de civilisation admet, mais elle met encore la liberté sous la sauvegarde des sentiments nobles et généreux. La confiance mutuelle du gouvernement et du peuple, les égards dus au talent et à la vertu, la bienveillance envers les nations étrangères, font parties de toute constitution libérale (Aretin, 170; ‘Les Idées’, 278-279).

Similarly, different connotations lie behind the concept of *gouvernement/Regierung*. Whereas the French author explicitly acknowledged the existence of an institutionalized opposition in parliament, Aretin could only focus on public opinion as a source of political legitimacy and as an instrument with which to counterbalance the dangers of despotic rule.
Here the different constitutional developments and experiences in both societies became obvious:

Eins der ersten Kennzeichen einer liberalen Regierung ist, daß sie öffentliche Verhandlungen über die den Staat und das Volk zunächst angehenden Gegenstände gestattet. Mit der Verhandlung wird auch der Widerspruch zugelassen. Jede liberale Regierung erlaubt also die Kritik ihrer Verfügungen: ja sie wünscht sie sogar, einmahl weil die freie Discussion allein dem Volke seine politische Freiheit beweist, und dann, weil sie die Regierung von dem Zustand der Volksstimmmung unterrichtet, und ihr Gelegenheit gibt, jene ungeheure moralische Kraft, genannt öffentliche Meinung, zu leiten und in Bewegung zu bringen; ein Vorteil, den der Despotismus gänzlich entbehrt.

Un des premiers caractères d'un gouvernement libéral, c'est de provoquer une discussion publique sur toutes les questions qui intéressent l'État et la nation. Mais admettre la discussion, c'est admettre la contradiction; or la contradiction habituelle, en fait de politique, est ce qu'on nomme opposition. Tout gouvernement libéral admet donc une opposition; il y a plus, il la désire, d'abord parce que l'existence bien manifeste d'une opposition peut seule constater l'existence de la liberté politique, ensuite parce que les débats entre les ministres et l'opposition signalent les erreurs où les premiers ont pu tomber, éclairent le gouvernement sur la situation de l'esprit public, et fournissent l'occasion de diriger, d'exciter et de mettre en mouvement l'opinion, cette force morale incalculable dont le despotisme se prive lui-même (Aretin, 1816: 171; Les Idées, 1815: 279-280).

The import of the new concept also provoked resistance, reflecting the change from politicization to ideological polarization: for Metternich and the German Confederation this concept could only denote a revolutionary direction. Public confidence in the ‘Liberalität der Regierung’ (Über Völkerbestimmung, 1816), the government’s liberality, for instance during the Prussian reform era or in the South German constitutional states of Baden, Württemberg and Bavaria, became more and more disillusioned after the reactionary change in the political atmosphere following the
murder of August von Kotzebue and the Carlsbad Decrees in 1819-1820. When it became clear that there would be no further constitutional progress and no parliaments in the single German states, liberal changed into an opposition-label, thus defining the progressive and backward forces in society. The use of the term now reflected the deepening gap between state and society, for which there was no equivalent in the history of the English concept liberal. At the end of the 1820s, liberalism in Germany signified an uncontested belief in the progress of reason while the restorative governments represented but backwardness and out-dated historical forces. The liberal party stood for a movement party (Bewegungspartei) – a symbol of natural progress in history (Mundt, 1834: 33).

Translations from French to German in that period meant an ongoing, implicit confrontation with France. In contrast to the optimistic self-estimation of what liberal should stand for, early definitions of liberal/liberalism in Germany reflected a specific uncertainty about the political and social implications of a concrete program. According to most contemporaries ‘wahrer Liberalismus’, true liberalism had to be defended against radical forces in the tradition of the French revolutionary Terror (Traugott Krug, 1832). At least until the French July Revolution of 1830, the history of liberal in Germany was at the same time a history of interpreting the French Revolution and its consequences in the German states. In Britain on the other hand, at least until the early 1830s, the delayed and reluctant import of the new concept pointed back to the experiences of the seventeenth century and the existence of pre-modern party names. In the British case, one is confronted with the complex translation from Whig to liberal (Leonhard, 2002). From this point of view, the history of liberal also stood for the different duration of distinct Anciens régimes, reflecting different Sattelzeiten. In France, Germany and Italy this was directly or indirectly marked by the period between 1789 and 1815, whereas Britain’s Ancien régime only came to an end in the course of the 1830s.

France was not the only birthplace of the new concept: again it was through a complex process of translations that Spanish liberales influ-
enced the modernization of other European vocabularies. The political meaning of *liberal* as a party denomination originated from the first Spanish constitution of 1812. The adherents of this new constitution called themselves *liberales* and spoke of their opponents who supported the principles of absolute monarchy as *serviles* (Fuentes and Fernández Sebastián, 2002). It was with regard to the political situation in Spain that the new political adjective *liberal* found its way into the English political vocabulary. The British example illustrates the limits of translations and the factors that shelter a political discourse against conceptual export from outside: the British import of the Spanish concept was a negative semantic adaptation. In 1816, Lord Castlereagh thought of a purely revolutionary party in the tradition of the French Jacobins when he spoke of the Spanish *liberales*, although in fact they originated in the fight against French occupation during Napoleon’s reign (Speech of 15<sup>th</sup> of February 1816 in Hansard [1803-1820, 37: 602]). Until 1818-1819, English authors made use of the new political concept *liberal* very often in the foreign spelling to describe the domestic political situation of continental countries, thereby underlining the un-English origin of the new political concept. But when speaking of British politics, authors continued to refer to the historical party names *Whig* and *Tory* or *radical* which had their origins in the seventeenth and eighteenth century.

The British example illustrated an imitating, not an adapting translation, which postponed discursive integration for a long time. The continental context dominated the meaning of *liberal* in English political texts until well after 1815. Only very reluctantly did *liberal* appear after 1815, indicating a changing tone in British politics. In 1816, Robert Southey spoke for the first time of the ‘British “liberales”’ thus mixing the Spanish spelling of the party name with an application to the English political scene and stigmatizing the political opponent by the use of the continental adjective (Southey, 1871, 2: 325). For many Tory authors, *liberal* served as a negative label with which they could relate their opponents to the revolutionary experiments in France, Spain, Italy or Greece. For them *liberal* represented Jacobin Terror and Napoleonic despotism under the guise of an apparently progressive label. The import of *libéral* or *liberales*
in the British case for a long time meant a confrontation with continental revolutionary experiences and thus provoked discursive resistance.

Only reluctantly the un-English connotation of *liberal* was overcome, making the semantic application of the new concept to English politics possible. An important catalyst for the integration of *liberal* into the English political vocabulary was the founding of Leigh Hunt's journal *The Liberal, or Verse and Prose from the South* in 1822, the short-lived but influential literary journal of the Byron-circle which contained articles by Byron and Shelley, often in a critical if not opposing tone, not only dealing with the political developments in the South of Europe but also criticizing the politics of George III and Lord Castlereagh. The title already anticipated the journal's program: the South of Europe with its revolutionary movements for national independence and political liberty, such as in Greece, constituted the background, but Leigh Hunt in the preface of the first edition also pointed to the traditional meaning of *liberal* in the context of classical education, thus relating the political implications to the ideal of Roman and Greek literature as the framework of humanity and political liberty (Hunt, 1822). It is significant that in the course of the public controversy about the new journal the opponents reacted to the title by publishing a satirical antidote: *The Illiberal, or Verse and Prose from the North* (Gifford, 1822).

The end of the Napoleonic wars in 1815 marked the end of the internal political abstinence in British politics. The blockade of any open and public debate about reform, defended until 1815 on the basis of the necessary concentration of the national forces on the fight against France, was lifted. The shift of political attention from foreign affairs to domestic problems began to provide a fertile ground for the semantic transformation of *liberal* from an apparently un-English adjective with revolutionary and continental implications into an integral concept of the English political language, especially for the reform-oriented Whigs inside and outside of parliament. This provided a new context in which the foreign concept's translation helped to develop a new framework for discourses about political reform. The changing atmosphere of public
opinion, now considered an important factor in the nation's political life, was reflected by the slow adaptation of the imported concept liberal. A quotation from Robert Peel's letter to John Wilson Croker in 1820 marks this moment in the semantic process: 'Do not you think that the tone of England — of that great compound of folly, weakness, prejudice, wrong feeling, right feeling, obstinacy, and newspaper paragraphs, which is called public opinion — is more liberal — to use an odious but intelligible phrase, than the policy of the Government? Do not you think that there is a feeling, becoming daily more general and more confined — that is independent of the pressure of taxation, or any immediate cause — in favour of some undefined change in the mode of governing the country?'.

In 1827, Henry Brougham, a leading member of the moderate Whigs among the Edinburgh Reviewers, reflected on the 'State of parties' since the beginning of the 1820s. He made extensive use of liberal to denote a new principle in British politics. Behind the progress of liberal opinions he identified a new concept of foreign policy, advocating national independence abroad and opposing the restorative objects of the Holy Alliance. Already before the transformation of the traditional party names Whig and Tory into Liberal and Conservative — a long-term semantic process which was not completed before the 1840s — Brougham concluded that the main ideological antagonism in British politics could no longer be expressed by traditional political labels. These party names had either originated from the seventeenth century and thus reflected the factions of the Civil War (Court versus Country), the political antagonists of the Glorious Revolution (Whig versus Tory) or they indicated the aspirations of the Stuarts (Loyalist versus Jacobin) during the eighteenth century or, pointing to the continent, the new party names coined in the course of the French Revolution: 'A new casting also of political sects has taken place; the distinctions, and almost the names, of Loyalist and Jacobin, Whig and Tory, Court and Country Faction, are fast wearing away. Two great divisions of the community will, in all likelihood, soon be far more generally known; the Liberal and the Illiberal, who will divide, but we may be sure most unequally, the suffrages of the Nation' (Brougham, 1827: 431). Unlike most continental party names which originated from the post-1789
period, *liberal* as a post-revolutionary concept in Britain can only be interpreted with regard to the ideological polarization since the absolutist experiments of the seventeenth century, pointing to a distinct British *Sattelzeit*. This was reproduced in the subsequent pre-modern party-names which did not have any equivalents in continental discourses.

Conclusion: Translating experiences as cultural transfer and semantic interaction

1. Experiences as analytical tools for the study of the past refer to various heuristic and hermeneutic dimensions: they bring together objective and subjective realities, past events and interpretations by past contemporaries. Historical analysis also allows for a differentiated view on the complex relation between the uniqueness of experiences and the potential repetition of structures of experiences. This is not only the case with regard to the individual or inter-subjective level, it can also be applied to the communication of experiences within and between societies. On a methodological level, this leads to the integration of comparison, transfer and entangled history into the field of conceptual history. In this article, the problem of translation was studied as a particular example in order to approach the questions when and why concepts, arguments, metaphors begin to 'travel' between societies or become translatable at all.

2. A comparative history of experiences is essentially different from the historicist focus on the singularity and uniqueness of history. Rather, certain structures of experience are reiterated. The communication of experiences presupposes analogies which form part of semantic transformations, not in the sense of an identity of experiences in different times and spaces, but in the sense of intrinsic transfers of interpretative knowledge. Traditional concepts, arguments, or languages are needed to structure political, social or cultural complexity. In this context, Reinhart Koselleck's three dimensions of historical experiences — 'earlier/later', 'intern/extern', 'above/below' — need particular attention. As he put it: 'a minimum of repetition is required
to know what might happen tomorrow’ (Fernández Sebastián and Fuentes, 2006: 103). There is no articulation and communication of expectations without a reservoir of past experiences, condensed in concepts, arguments and languages of political and social discourse.

3. The analysis of the concrete example demonstrated that the French stimulus of the idées libérales was fundamental for the development of new political and social concepts in Germany and Italy in the 1820s and early 1830s. In addition, the intensified debates about the French Charte Constitutionnelle of 1814 as a constitution libérale and the polarization between ultra and libéraux popularized the new concepts well beyond France. Translations of the French import in Germany and Italy changed from imitation over application and adaption to discursive integration. In contrast to Germany or Italy, where the direct import of the idées libérales resulted in translations and direct applications of the French concept to identify and formulate the demands for national unity and constitutional reforms after 1815, the confrontation with the new concept in Britain took a different path: regarding the Spanish liberales or the French libéraux, the new political adjective was for a long period used to describe the political situation in continental countries. Only after 1815 the Tories’ use of liberal as a derogatory label for their political opponents and the Philhellene movement contributed to a wider diffusion of liberal. However, for a long time liberal retained an un-English tone because it represented political movements and groups in countries other than Britain. Only after 1820, when the reform oriented Whigs of the Edinburgh Review accepted the new concept as a term with which to label their own position and political strategy, liberal for the first time became a positive and progressive semantic indicator in English political language, replacing the traditional semantic oppositions between Court/Country, Whig/Tory and Jacobin/Loyalist.

4. A focus on comparison and transfer makes the different Sattelzeiten of European concepts and vocabularies more visible, reflecting distinct rhythms and cycles of past experiences and expectations as they were stimulated and catalyzed by the export and import of concepts.
These experiences and expectations could not easily be translated, but rather led to complex confrontations with otherness. Translations reflected processes of selective perception stimulating cultural transfers and allowing the articulation of new political and social premises. For the historian, translations serve as a seismographic indicator of how past contemporaries articulated their past pasts and their past futures. Friedrich Nietzsche once stated that a concept which contained in itself a whole history, evaded definition – 'definable is only that which has no history' (Nietzsche, 1993: 317). However, history necessarily implies translation, whether diachronic or synchronic. The historian, who starts travelling in the landscapes of past experiences and expectations, is well advised to remember that as a traveller he will be dependent on translations. Hermeneutic dictionaries must be part of his vade-mecum if he does not want to become lost in translation. Travelling implies contact and confrontation, comparison and change of perspectives. Uncertainty leads to questions not asked before.
Notes


3 See for example Konrad Ferdinand Oelsner’s letter dated 10th May 1797, quoted in Deinet (1981: 285).

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